

THE ORGANIZATION DRIVE

A drive toward labor-union organization of a European, mainly German, type had begun long before the general strike. The Mensheviks were particularly active and succeeded in organizing small groups in various plants and occupations. The movement gained a new momentum after the Manifesto. Now the organizers could work in the open; meetings could be called legally by the distribution of handbills; employers could not fire workers for such activities; rather, the president of a local union was recognized as the workers' spokesman not only by the management but also by the police. Some three or four score unions were organized in St. Petersburg after the general strike, and a Central Bureau was established to foster their further development.

I realized the importance of this drive but was too busy with factory meetings and general political propaganda to give it much time, though I went to unionization meetings, large and small, whenever I was called. Two episodes of this phase of my work remain fresh in my memory. In one case I was fairly successful; in the other, I failed completely.

One Sunday I was asked to speak at the inaugural meeting of the union of commercial employees, held in a theater. The audience was less responsive than in the factories, but I was impressed by the opening remarks of the chairman, a young store clerk. He had an insignificant appearance but sounded like a born orator. I had about an hour to speak on the aims of labor unions but proposed to talk for some twenty minutes and then turn the meeting over to him to present the grievances and aspirations of his colleagues.

The plan worked, and the chairman made a fine speech. The meeting ended with the election of a temporary board, with him as president. Then he asked that I be made a member of the board, as educational director and editor of the union's publications. His proposal was accepted with applause, and both of us were sent to the Central Bureau as representatives of the budding union. The union had only four or five thousand members at that time, but there were some two hundred thousand commercial employees in St. Petersburg, so potentially it represented a very large group. For the next two years, as long as I stayed in the capital, I remained in touch with this union.

My role in establishing the union of commercial employees unexpectedly brought me repute as a successful organizer, and I was not surprised when Anton, with a mysterious air, asked me to go with Nikolai to an organization meeting of police officers—a respon-